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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE SECRETARY

Statement of
Richard W. Riley
U.S. Secretary of Education
before the
Federal Communications Commission
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My main message to you as you consider the many ramifications of this new telecommunications law is that this is no time to think short term.

If we want to jump-start American education into the future, and that is something we just have to do for our economic future, we should accept some short-term costs in order to gain the long-term benefits that come with this telecommunications revolution.

And by that I mean simply this -- every effort should be made to give our nation's schools and libraries free access to the new telecommunications world that is now emerging or access at substantially discounted rates.

While this may cause some eye brows to get raised, I believe that in the long-term it will strategically position America to reap the economic benefits of this new knowledge based economy. For it is my very strong belief that three things of great importance will occur if we are willing to accept the short-term costs associated with this proposal.

First, we will very rapidly give a generation of young people the skills they need to enter this new knowledge based economy. In one bold stroke we will lift the level of the American work force. This is something that every business leader in America has been asking us to do for over a decade. Why not make this our national mission?

This afternoon I will be giving awards to some of the best tech prep and voc-ed schools in the nation. They are on the cutting edge of reform. I assure you these schools are tuned into what business want in its workforce.

But these schools are more the exception rather than the rule. It is time to stop being satisfied with little success stories and move to a national perspective. It is ultimately a question of scale.

If we want a national work force that is skillful and prepared for this new global economy we have to have a much bolder vision of how we move America forward. I believe you have the power to make this happen by putting America's schools and libraries at the head of the line.

Second, by accepting the concept of "free access" or access at very low rates you will fundamentally change the very nature of American education by increasing the pace of reform.

For over a decade now we have working to raise the level of American education. It is hard work and we are turning the corner. I see progress everywhere I go. But, over all, the pace of reform is too slow to satisfy me. If we want to "fast forward" American education, and drive American education into the 21st century this is the way to go.

Third, by putting America's schools and libraries on line quickly you will create a much more sophisticated market for telecommunications services in the years to come. The customer base for services will be broader and deeper, and the entire telecommunications industry will be all the better for it.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, then, in my opinion, provides us with a unique window of opportunity not only to jump ahead economically but to radically speed up the pace of our efforts to improve American education. Access to telecommunications can bring the resources of the best libraries, museums, universities, and research into local classrooms and libraries, no matter where they are located.

The recommendations of the Joint Board have the potential to be history making if you are bold enough and strong enough to have such a vision.

President Clinton and Vice-President Gore have been strong and tireless

proponents for making our nation's schools and libraries full participants in the ongoing telecommunications revolution. This is why the Clinton Administration has set a goal of having *every classroom and library in the Nation connected to the Internet by the year 2000*.

The connection between telecommunications access and student performance are, in my opinion, compelling. Telecommunications technologies are helping students to master basic skills such as reading and writing, and to learn advanced skills for college and the workplace.

I have seen this progress first hand. It is simply astonishing what young people can do once they make the connection between computers and learning. Universal service and affordable connections for schools and libraries, then, have long-term implications for educational quality and equality. Both are important national objectives.

Unfortunately, there is a huge gap between need and availability. Today, few classrooms and libraries are connected. The costs of initial connections, charges for ongoing service, and a lack of necessary infrastructure in school and library buildings are barriers to more widespread educational use.

Nevertheless, reaching every school and library by the year 2000 is an achievable goal. Classroom access to the Internet tripled in just one year, from 3 percent in 1994 to nine percent in 1995.¹

The goal of connections, and the larger objective of technological literacy for all students -- are of great concern to the American people. They simply want to it happen, and they have the good common sense to recognize that our country will be all the better for it if we make this our national mission.

Meeting the goal of connecting every classroom and library to the information highway will require a unique partnership between the FCC and state

¹National Center for Education Statistics, *Advanced Telecommunications in U.S. Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*, 1995, February, 1996

regulatory authorities. It will also require a commitment from school and library boards, telecommunications providers, teachers, librarians, administrators, and parents.

But it can happen and it should happen. The key is to avoid the trap of short-term thinking. I want to suggest to you that a remarkable opportunity lies before the FCC and the Joint Board.

I urge you to seize this opportunity, to recognize the historical moment, and take the bold stroke of making sure that all the children of America have at their fingertips the best quality information in the world.

In closing I want the young people of America to speak for themselves. I want now to introduce a four minute videotape made by the students in the Olympia, Washington public schools, the home state of Commissioner Nelson.

Thank you.